

Red Light Ladies in the American West: Entrepreneurs and Companions

ALEXY SIMMONS

Red Light Ladies, as a part of the business community in historical American mining towns, are identifiable in the archaeological and historical record. The settlement pattern of prostitutes as well as type of prostitution was directly influenced by the economic, social and political structure of local communities. Thus, analysis of data relating to prostitution can provide substantial information about many poorly documented mining settlements. The author is with the New Zealand Department of Conservation, Hamilton.

INTRODUCTION

As archaeologists become involved in urban archaeology, by necessity they must adequately address economic and social patterns in towns over time. The archaeological sampling of identifiable socio-economic and ethnic populations within an historic urban setting provides a means for supplementing the often fragmentary, inaccurate and ethnocentric historical record.

RED LIGHT LADIES

On the western mining frontier of the United States red light ladies, or prostitutes, constituted an important and identifiable socio-economic group. Their activities and locales are recognisable to varying degrees in the archaeological and historical record contingent on the type of prostitution and the evolution of the mining settlements. The artefacts associated with prostitutes are the artefacts of their profession and the possessions of women. The frequency of both elements are essential to the identification of prostitution, since 'brass checks' or tokens were not associated with most establishments. Perfume bottles, cosmetics, jewellery and hair, hat and dress ornaments were part of the professional equipment, as well as the pharmaceuticals and paraphernalia of the day for birth control and venereal disease treatment. These included douches, suppositories, abortifacients and venereal disease cures such as Naples Soap, The Boss, Armenian Pills, Big G, Bumsted's Gleet Cure, Red Drops and Pineknot Bitters.

Alcohol consumption was a standard part of the customer offering, except at the most desolate levels of the profession. Alcohol, opiates, codeine, laudanum, chloroform and tonics containing high percentages of alcohol were used by many prostitutes to ease the woes of the profession. Less frequent items of material culture are artefacts relating to men, such as cigar butts, cuff links and buttons, which might be lost during a visit. There is also a low representation of children's artefacts associated with most bawdy houses. Many prostitutes had children, but they were usually boarded elsewhere or with relatives. There were exceptions particularly among resident prostitutes.

ETHNICITY

No graphic differences existed between North American, South American or European prostitutes (hereafter termed Euro-American), but differences did exist between Euro-American, Black and Chinese prostitutes. Black prostitutes were relatively uncommon in the western mining communities, especially in the middle to late 1800s. The few resident Black prostitutes were segregated from Euro-American and Chinese prostitutes, although octoroons and quadroons often worked in Euro-American establishments and were specifically marketed as 'exotics'. The marketing of national groups, such as the French, was also evident. Some prostitutes assumed French sounding names and claimed French blood. Certain ethnic groups or national groups might also dominate in an establishment.

The brothels and establishment of Black prostitutes were located at the edge of red light districts, in Black ghettos or neighbourhoods, or on the outskirts of town. In the early 1900s a Black brothel, 'the pinkhouse', was located on the outskirts of Silver City, Idaho, near the Chinese district¹. In Virginia City, they were associated with the Hotel d'Afrique. Because of the small number of Black prostitutes in the many western mining towns and the complexity of political attitudes relating to slavery and free blacks, their situation will not be specifically examined in this paper.

Chinese prostitutes were also segregated. Chinese and Euro-American prostitutes did not occupy the same establishments. Interestingly, with increased Japanese immigration in the late 1800s and early 1900s Japanese prostitutes often worked in Euro-American establishments. Chinese prostitutes were also set apart from Euro-American prostitutes, in some cases, by the clientele they served and their economic status as prostitutes. Euro-American prostitutes could leave the profession at will, whereas most Chinese prostitutes were indentured or owned. The structure of Chinese prostitution was largely a reflection of the Chinese cultural attitude toward women. Similarly, the Euro-American attitude toward prostitution and prostitutes was a product of the Victorian cultural milieu.

In the instant towns of the frontier there existed a demand for female companionship and sexuality. The population was predominantly composed of males ranging

from teenagers to those in their forties. The deficit of ordinary or respectable women resulted in limited functional separation of disreputable and reputable women. The actual labelling of ladies of ill fame was concurrent with the arrival of a substantial number of respectable women and their families. Prostitutes on the frontier posed an interesting threat not only to Victorian sexual mores, but provided competition for social status gained through charitable work. High status prostitutes often took on the few community roles, such as the provision of charity, through which respectable Victorian women gained community recognition and status, apart from that of their husbands. In Silver City Idaho Lea Perry, a local madam, provided new clothes for poor children and grubstaked miners who were down on their luck. When she died she was honoured by having pallbearers that were married men and being buried as close to the cemetery gate as they could put her, but of course outside the cemetery proper.²

Chinese prostitutes, who functioned in a very different social milieu, albeit in the same community, also gained status from traditional female roles. Chinese prostitutes gained recognition through the role of talented hostess, or via business management, or ownership of other prostitutes.

EURO-AMERICAN PROSTITUTION

The lifeway of Euro-American prostitutes on the western frontier was like, and yet unlike, that of prostitutes in established eastern cities. Frontier prostitutes experienced a greater degree of community interaction and integration, mobility and latitude in community settlement patterns, from the 1840s to the 1900s, than their contemporary sisters in eastern cities. These notable differences were a product of the frontier effect.³

Euro-American prostitutes included women from South America, North America, England, Germany, Spain, Scotland, Iceland, France and the Netherlands. Most Euro-American women entered the profession out of economic necessity; many left their country of origin owing to famine (as in the case of South American women) or poor economic conditions, and the promise of jobs and marriage. There were few employment options for women during the Victorian period. The Victorian perspective was that a woman's economic well-being and social standing were secured through marriage. Few acceptable job opportunities existed and many jobs were not considered socially acceptable. Women were employed as seamstresses, milliners, nurses, clerks, factory workers and teachers. A few like Lola Crabtree were actresses and song

Table 1
GENERAL TYPES OF EURO-AMERICAN PROSTITUTION

Type	Business Establishment Associated With	Client Contact	Fee	Economic Control Over Service Held By
1. Mistress	Residence/home	One client focus, temporary live-in arrangement, date	Room and board, living allowance, gifts	Mistress
2. Courtesan	Residence/home	Group of select admirers, weekend or temporary live-in, date	Luxury items, gifts, \$10-\$100	Courtesan
3. Parlor House	Establishment furnishing a parlor for receiving clients and bedrooms for business. Emphasis on luxurious decor	1 hour-evening in the parlor house	\$5-\$50	Madam Prostitute
4. Brothel	Establishment furnishing a receiving area and bedrooms for business	½ hour-evening at the brothel	\$1-10	Madam Prostitute
5. Residence	Small house or lodging place occupied by one or several women who reside there and provide various services to a customer	Varied	\$1-30	Prostitute
6. Crib	Grouping of small one-room houses or apartments, generally all in a line. They are rented by the prostitute for approximately \$5 a day	10-20 minutes (client remains clothed)	\$0.25-\$1	Prostitute/Procurer
7. Dance Hall/Saloon	Small rooms or screened cubicles in hall or saloon	Varied	Varies, usually a percentage from alcohol sales	Prostitute/Proprietor

Revised Source: Simmons, Alexy. Red Light Ladies: A Perspective on the Frontier Community, *Northwest Anthropological Research Notes*, Vol 16 No. 1:107-114, 1982.

birds. The public nature of many of these positions resulted in moralistic scrutiny and differential behaviour towards employed women.

In addition, women were often underpaid resulting in occasional prostitution as an income supplement. Women who were without economic means or support from their extended family often turned to prostitution. A few women who were decidedly entrepreneurs saw frontier brothels like hotels and boarding houses as a good business opportunity.

Class differences existed in the Euro-American red light community. Prostitutes as a socio-economic group gained their status and resulting economic position through the customers with whom they associated and the type of service they provided. Usually the more flagrant a prostitute was, the less status she held.⁴ On the Comstock, Marion Goldman⁵ found that rank was dependent upon whether a woman was clandestine or flagrant in soliciting customers; subtle or open about obtaining payment; selling talents or attributes other than straight, impersonal sex; involved with few or many men; expensive or cheap; and patronised by rich or poor men.

Table 1 provides a general summary of most of the types of prostitution available on the frontier which are briefly discussed below.

Mistresses have been characterised in the literature for generations. They and their situation varied greatly and are often difficult to identify in the historic or archaeological record.

The courtesan and resident prostitute (number 5 on Table 1) worked out of their homes but were at different ends of the social strata. The courtesan sold her charms as well as sex, whereas the resident prostitute has frequently been characterised as an abandoned woman who was trying to provide subsistence for her children through prostitution. Although, as with all types of prostitution her situation varied greatly.

The range of establishments associated with various types of prostitution are defined in Table 1. The parlour house was the aristocratic level of prostitution and had a specific room for receiving and entertaining customers. The atmosphere of the parlour house emphasised luxury. Dinner, music, alcohol and conversation might all play a role in an evening's entertainment. The parlour house prostitute commanded a price that afforded luxuries, leisure time and social mobility out of the profession.

The brothel provided an atmosphere that simulated that of the parlour house. Luxury and entertainment prior to sexual service received less attention. Emphasis was placed on the sex-money transaction. Brothels varied but generally contained a receiving room or entry alcove and, of course, bedrooms.

Sporting Row, Maiden Lane, Stingsaree Gulch were the descriptive place names for the 'line'. The cribs of the line were small one room apartments or houses, all in a row or line. The cribs were rented by individual prostitutes for approximately five dollars a day. Some lines featured the name of the prostitute on the crib door. The ladies of the line solicited from the crib door. Usually a kimono or loose garment was worn. Clients remained dressed and service was brief. Often an oil cloth was placed at the foot of the bed to protect the cover from shoes and boots. The interior of a crib is described in Copper Camp:

"A bed in one corner, in another a stove, a coal hod and a bundle of kindling. A small dresser with a wash basin against the wall. Permeating everything a mixed odour (sic) of disinfectant, hair oil and cheap perfume. On the walls a few pictures, oddly enough, usually of some pastoral or equally innocent scene".⁶

The saloon and dance hall level of prostitution, as with the mistress and courtesan-resident types of prostitution, are the least definable historically and archaeologically. Saloon prostitution is obscure because sexual services were often not a direct part of the entertainment offering. In some establishments sexual services were available, while in others they may have been provided after working hours. Saloons might have bedrooms or screened cubicles wherein the customer could receive private entertainment. The focus of the saloon and dance hall ultimately was alcohol sales. Other services may have supplemented the entertainer's income. The dance hall and saloon have traditionally served as a contact point for procurement of sexual services.

Based on the open-market structure of the frontier, prostitutes could move up and down in the stratified class system. Stratification defined a prostitute's job, mitigated competition among prostitutes, and accommodated customers.⁷ Professional levels were based on ethnicity, social background, education, specific talents, appearance and experience. Appearance was of less importance than social skills among higher class prostitutes. As in most businesses, entrepreneurship was a major factor in a prostitute's ability to gain economic rewards from the profession. Economic rewards included becoming madams and owners. Prostitution establishments were largely owned by women from the mid nineteenth to the early twentieth century. Women could accumulate substantial revenue and leave the profession, particularly if they were among the higher ranks of the profession. On the frontier, both men and women were able to bury their pasts and take up a new life, and many did.

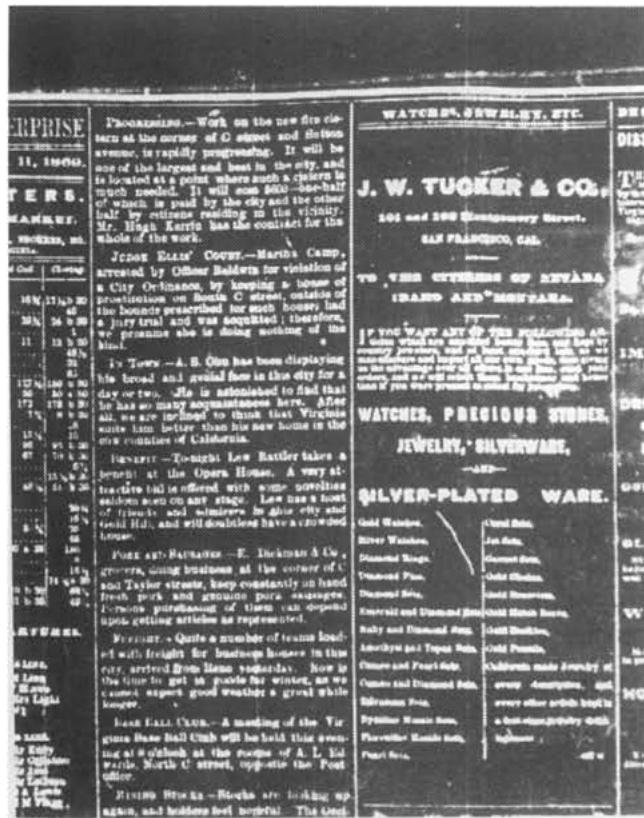


Fig. 1: Attempts at enforcing an ordinance in Virginia City (second paragraph, second column) published in the *Territorial Enterprise*, Virginia City, Nevada, 11 November 1869.

HISTORIC CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE ON CHINESE PROSTITUTES

Chinese and Euro-American prostitutes were set apart not

only by their apparent ethnic affiliation, but also by Euro-American and Chinese attitudes. Chinese attitudes about women and prostitution were based on a long cultural history. Historically, Chinese society was patriarchal and patrilineal; thus, a daughter could provide only a short-term benefit to her family through her labour and as an adult could not carry on the ancestral line. Female children were usually considered a liability since they were raised for another family. In times of poverty female children sometimes were sold into wealthier families, either as servants or as potential daughters-in-law. Female infanticide was also practiced, at least among the poorest classes.⁸ During the mid to late nineteenth century, southern China was experiencing political and economic disorder. Population pressure, rebellion and natural disaster paired with employment opportunities on the west coast of the United States, provided the stimulus for the emigration of men from Guangdong province. They arrived on the Pacific coast as prospectors and labourers.

In southern China during the middle to late 1800s one remunerative solution for relieving a family of its female members was their sale as entertainers and prostitutes, since the sale of a daughter could help support the family. During this period it was reported by a Qing dynasty official that as many as ten family members might be dependent on a Canton prostitute for their subsistence.⁹

Only a small number of Chinese prostitutes travelled to the Pacific coast, as most did not have the financial means to emigrate of their own accord. The few Chinese women who arrived in the early 1850s worked under a free economy controlling their own services.

The majority of the Chinese prostitutes were 'big-footed' peasant girls who were sold by their families via contract.

The girls usually accepted their sale, however reluctantly, out of filial loyalty; most were not in a position to oppose their family's decision.¹⁰ The sheltered and secluded lives that women were forced to live made them particularly vulnerable to manipulation, and many were tricked or lured into prostitution.¹¹ Procurers often promised gold, marriage, jobs or education.

The agents received a regular circular of 'price current' from San Francisco giving them information concerning the state of the market and the maximum prices which could be paid to derive an acceptable profit.¹² Only a few contracts for prostitution have been found. In some cases, outright sale occurred with no stipulation for freedom at the end of the indenture period. The contracts¹³ generally included free passage to the United States for the contractee, plus an advance of \$200 to \$500 for four to five years of indentured labour as a prostitute. Although an average sale figure was several hundred dollars, a prostitute potentially could be worth as much as \$3000 if she was exceptionally beautiful.¹⁴ The contracts included conditions such as missed days due to illness, menstrual periods and pregnancy. The contracts were appealing to the families since girls were often sold for less than \$200 to \$400. The contracts also appealed to brothel owners, since four to five years was considered the prime market period for a Chinese prostitute. The capital outlay for a prostitute was small in comparison with their potential under contract for four years. The contract price, plus passage, was usually under \$600. Based on an estimated four to ten customers a day at a gross earning of 38 cents per customer it has been estimated that the average Chinese prostitute earned approximately \$850 per year and \$3400 in four years of servitude.¹⁵ Even with an estimated subsistence cost of \$8 per month, the lowest grade of prostitute turned a profit for her owner. In addition, many



Fig. 2: The first lady entertainers in Jacksonville, Oregon. (From Sutton 1965).



Fig. 3: A Chinese prostitute looking out the window of a crib door, Chinatown San Francisco. (From Miller 1964).

Chinese prostitutes were employed doing piece work such as sewing or other jobs during slack periods at the brothel.

Culturally, Chinese prostitutes were viewed as obedient daughters who were following the wishes of their families. The Chinese working class did not attach the same stigma to prostitution as Euro-Americans did. Because of this cultural attitude, and the shortage of Chinese women in the United States, Chinese prostitutes could readily become respectable wives within the Chinese working class. Many Chinese prostitutes were purchased out of prostitution through satisfaction of their contracts and became wives or concubines.

Chinese prostitutes were between the ages of 15 to 35, with the majority in their late teens or early 20s at the time of entry. Two general classes existed among Chinese prostitutes: a higher and lower status. Higher status prostitutes did not have sexual contact with Euro-American men. They often occupied apartments in houses or upstairs rooms and served as hostesses, and provided companionship and sexual services to select Chinese customers. They were usually well-attired and could acquire some personal wealth through gifts from patrons.

In contrast, lower status Chinese prostitutes were considered by Euro-Americans to be in the lowest ranks of the profession. This was owing to their ethnic origin, to limited, if any, ability to speak English, and to low price for services which were purely sexual. They provided services to an ethnic mix of customers and had little recourse but to accept all customers seeking their services. They earned from 25 to 50 cents per brief visit. Low status Chinese prostitutes occupied small rooms or cubicles in gambling

halls, opium dens, brothels and cribs. The small room 1.2 by 1.8 metres (4 by 6 feet) of the prostitute might be sparsely furnished with a wash basin, a hard bunk covered with matting and perhaps a bamboo chair or two.¹⁶

Unlike Euro-American prostitution, Chinese prostitution was characterised by layers of exploitative relations; that included ruthless exploitation of women by others who owned a woman's sexuality or expropriated her earnings.¹⁷

Within western cities and large mining centres, such as Virginia City, there would be both higher and lower status Chinese prostitutes. They resided within the Chinatown part of the towns; the lower status prostitutes being more readily identifiable than the higher status in the archaeological and historical record. Higher status Chinese prostitutes seldom shared a residence with other prostitutes, but instead resided with one or more men. The material remains relating to high status Chinese prostitutes, like those of a mistress, would be difficult to distinguish from those of a Chinese wife. Similarly, mention of higher status prostitutes is not made in the journals or diaries of Euro-American men since their sexual contact with them was considered polluting and thus lowered the value and status of the women. For example, in Virginia City in the 1870 census, women who were probably upper class Chinese prostitutes were identified as 'harlots', were often residing with gamblers and were the only women listed in the household.¹⁸ In contrast, from two to eight lower status Chinese prostitutes often shared a residence.¹⁹ Chinese brothels or cribs might be located side by side or separated by other commercial establishments or residences.

PROSTITUTION AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC PATTERNS IN A COMMUNITY

Most men could afford the services of a prostitute and generally tended to patronise prostitutes of their own socio-economic standing. The class lines within prostitution not only reflected the larger community, but also maintained those of the community. The size and type of establishments among both the Chinese and Euro-Americans were a response to the population composition and economic trends in a town, as was the location of prostitutes in the community. Chinese prostitutes responded to and reflected the economic trends of the Chinese community. The Chinese economy appears to have been autonomous in towns such as Silver City, Idaho where placer mining by the Chinese was occurring. In towns where the Chinese were legally barred from mining and were primarily employed in the provision of services, such as domestic labour to Euro-Americans, the Chinese community reflected the Euro-American economy.

Chinese and Euro-American prostitute populations responded to the economic trends in a community. During economic booms (bonanza phases), the number of prostitutes increased proportionately, they often gathered in several red light districts, and their establishments increased in size. During recession or depression phases prostitute numbers decreased and establishments declined in quantity and size. Some stability occurred at the madam or owner level across economic phases. Madams such as Cad Thompson of Virginia City, and Lea Perry of Silver City, Idaho remained in the same communities for ten years or more riding out economic fluctuations.

GENERAL MODEL OF PROSTITUTION IN FRONTIER MINING COMMUNITIES

The economy of the frontier mining community was based on a depletable resource that had a variable geologic depth and composition. Different types of settlements developed in a region based on the character of the mining resource. With the first find in an area instant cities or boom towns would spring up virtually overnight and were either abandoned in a short period of time or developed into corporate towns or regional supply centres for the surrounding mining districts.

These early communities were tent towns: instant cities in which prostitution and other enterprises grew up side by side in a business district which might be interspersed with residences. The red light ladies of this period would have been considered middle- to low-status prostitutes in established cities. Prostitutes worked out of tents and later from small cottages, rooms above saloons or boarding houses. Dance hall girls, or 'hurdy gurdies', might also be involved in periodic prostitution.

In some towns, the commercial district grew up with the red light district separated from other establishments. In Cripple Creek, Colorado a district of brothels grew up on Myers Avenue and restaurants, food and clothing stores, drug stores and hardware stores were located one block north of Bennett Avenue. As Cripple Creek matured, an ordinance was passed restricting saloons, gambling establishments and bawdy houses from Bennett Avenue. An incentive for compliance with this ordinance was an earlier resolution in which the city council allowed saloons, dance halls and establishments of prostitution unrestricted operation if they moved one block south of Bennett Avenue to the Myers Avenue area.

If the instant town survived it might evolve into a sizeable city. Whether it became a corporate town like Virginia City or a regional supply centre was contingent on the geological nature of the resource and the technology used to exploit it.

CORPORATE TOWN

Hard rock mining was the usual economic base for the corporate town. Hard rock mining required extensive capital, a managerial staff, a stable labour force and complex technology. The corporate town created a market for high-status prostitutes, entertainers and more for prostitutes in general. The stabilised labour force of the corporate town, which included managers, brought a change in demography. Wives and families settled in the corporate town. This created a major chasm in the business community wherein businessmen once loaned money to madams and occupied establishments side by side with red light ladies. Businesses located near establishments of prostitution were suddenly adversely affected. Respectable women did not want to see or associate with what they considered disreputable women. The business community launched restrictive campaigns that called for segregation and restriction on the location of bawdy houses. The



Fig. 4: Josephine Airey, known as Jo Chicago, was one of Helena's famous madams from 1867 to 1900. (From Petrik 1981).

petitions usually resulted in little action until an economic recession occurred. During recessions, ordinances against prostitution and residential restrictions were passed, though there was often little enforcement during the depressions which often followed recessions.

Depressions brought changes through a decrease in the prostitute population. Growing out of this demographic change might be a relocation of the red light district and the business community during the anticipated economic upturn that would follow. For example, in Helena, Montana in the late 1870s following the depression of 1871 madams like Jo Chicago expanded their establishments to meet client demand for sophistication, elegance and entertainment similar to that found in Denver or San Francisco. The regular business community also expanded and in some cases relocated from its 1870 Wood Street area to Main Street, which facilitated consolidation and expansion of the red light district in the Wood Street area.

REGIONAL CENTRES

Regional centres were used as supply and market towns which served outlying mining districts. Regional centres were usually associated with placer mining districts. In the regional centre the miner was a less evident member of the town population as the workings of placer deposits required the occupation of small outlying districts. Merchants, farmers, tradespeople and ranchers made up the town population. The regional mining centres were like the railroad towns of other regions. With the evolution of an instant city into a regional centre there was a major shift in the location of prostitution establishments. Establishments were located at the edge of town or outside the city limits. Owing to the fluctuating demand for services from the non-resident population and the class composition of customers the outlying districts generally did not have the variety or number of establishments evident in corporate town.

RESOURCE EXHAUSTION

Resource exhaustion in a population centre saw the dissolution of many businesses including prostitution. High status prostitutes, entertainers and dance hall girls were often the first to leave. Middle status prostitutes could also generally afford to leave rapidly, either through financial means or connections in other towns. Low status prostitutes had less mobility or economic means. High status Chinese prostitutes might move with their owner or be sold. Similarly, low status Chinese prostitutes might be shipped to another town or sold.

CONCLUSION

The crib prostitute and the madam lived very different, but contemporary lifestyles in the same community as members of the same socio-economic group. The lifeway of prostitutes changed over time in towns due to the dynamic nature of the frontier community. A frontier community was instant and transient in structure. The community and its residents rode the tide of an economy based on a single resource. The settlement pattern of the various classes of prostitutes in a town reflected the structure of the mining community and its variable economic, demographic and social patterns as they changed over time. Archaeological and historic research on prostitutes in a given historic western mining community can provide insights into the structure of the community and substantive data about poorly documented communities.

NOTES

1. Williams 1981.
2. Williams 1981.
3. Bohanan and Plog 1967; Miller and Steffen 1976.
4. Gordon 1978:110-111.
5. Goldman 1981:73-74.
6. Works Project Administration Writers 1943:180.
7. Goldman 1981.
8. Wegars 1984:3.
9. Hirata 1979.
10. Hirata 1979.
11. Hirata 1979:6.
12. Hirata 1979:9.
13. See United States Industrial Commission 1901:771-772 and California Senate 1877:128 and 135.
14. Mark and Chin 1982:62.
15. Hirata 1979.
16. United States Congress 1877:192.
17. Hirata 1979.
18. Example household 54 11/11 and 55 4/4:1870 Manuscript Census of Virginia City, Nevada; in Simmons 1984:346.
19. Example household 56 1/1: Manuscript Census of Virginia City, Nevada, in Simmons 1984:346.

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